

City, School Policies Defended

BY ROBERT ADOLPH

The woman from the NAACP sat there in the small, crowded Negro church, flanked by members of the White Citizens Council and the Black Muslims. She was calm and proper, but she was angry. She said she had been vainly trying since August, 1964, to get the Board of Education to desegregate the elementary schools.

Then she spoke about the Human Rights Commission and the city ordinance that requires City Council approval before any commission activity is undertaken: "How can an organization hamstrung like that accomplish anything? Besides, no one ever appointed to that commission has ever, to my knowledge, shown any interest in civil rights."

The next morning Harold E. Steere, chairman of the Human Rights Commission and assistant superintendent of schools, sat in the spacious board room at the Board of Education office, puffed reflectively on his pipe and said no, he thought the criticism by the woman from the NAACP was wrong: "I think everybody on the commission is concerned with civil rights. We wouldn't have gone to the trouble we did on the public accommodations issue last year if we weren't." He said the commission is an advisory arm of the City Council which

does background reports on any subject in its field assigned to it by the council. He agreed some might consider this being "hamstrung," but added that these were the terms under which similar commissions in most cities operate.

AN INSTANCE of the commission in action came last year when the City Council received complaints from Negroes because the owners of many entertainment establishments would not serve them. The commission brought groups of proprietors together to discuss the problem. "We sought a consensus. We have no subpoena power, no authority. We just wanted to show them their fears were ungrounded. Some were afraid their businesses would suffer if they integrated. So we showed them evidence from other cities to disprove that. Many were willing to go along if the others would. For us, it was just a matter of getting the ball rolling. That's the way the commission prefers to operate. We try to get at all sides of a problem, not ride roughshod over anybody."

Steere said he mentioned to Mayor John H. Longwell last year that housing for Negro students was becoming a problem and that the mayor suggested the commission conduct a survey to determine the ex-

tent of the problem. A telephone canvass showed some 60 per cent of the 1,200 spaces available could be rented by members of any race. "A really extensive methodical sampling of the city would have cost far more than the \$200 we had, and we would have had to hire professionals to help. This was beyond the scope of the job the Council asked us to do."

THE COMMISSION'S most recent task was not assigned to it—recruiting members. The nine-member body has two unfilled spots, and it is often unable to raise a quorum of five at meetings to conduct any business. Steere said he plans to ask city manager Don Allard to propose new members to the City Council as soon as he sees him. He said he didn't know why the commission was having such difficulty in getting members and quorums.

He doubted the body's official subservience to the council was a factor. "We're not an investigative body, like the police. Nor are we an independent agency, like the Council on Religion and Race. Those who join the commission know that and don't feel it impairs the effectiveness of the commission's work."

SWITCHING HATS, Steere defended the Board of Educa-

tion against charges of de facto school segregation. "We don't segregate white and black. We believe in the neighborhood school concept, and we don't believe in bussing children eight blocks when there's a good school across the street. Every school has equal access to all teachers, books and facilities we have. When we draw boundaries for each school district, we make the decisions solely for the benefit of the children and without regard to race."

He said the board complied promptly with the Supreme Court's 1954 decision outlawing school segregation by phasing out the Negro high and Junior high schools. "But we could not, and still cannot, do away with the (all-Negro) Douglass school because we haven't got the classrooms. We now use every available classroom, and we are overcrowded. If the school bond issue passes next week by the full amount asked, we will be covered through 1968. Then we'll be overcrowded again. Columbia is growing so fast we are barely able to keep up much less get enough ahead to enable us to eliminate the Douglass school."

Steere explained that the state constitution permits a school district to incur bonded indebtedness up to 10 per cent of its assessed value. "We do this every two years, and it's

still not enough to let us expand. The rule is particularly difficult for a city like Columbia, whose main industry, education, is non-taxable. We are held to an assessed valuation based on property, and that sets a low ceiling."

He said the city has begun a \$94,000 remedial reading and study clinic for the four schools in the city's "poverty area"—Field, Benton, Ridgeway and Douglass schools. "Whether a school's students are white or Negro or both does not affect the quality of education it offers. Every school gets everything we have."

BUT THE LADY from the NAACP had said that an official of the state Human Rights Commission had told her if one Negro family sued the Board of Education for de facto school segregation, the board would be forced to take measures, such as bussing, to alleviate racial imbalance. "I doubt that very much," Steere said. "Most recent court decisions have upheld school districts that were drawn up not to segregate but to maintain the neighborhood school."

He added that the board does not know how many Negroes attend each school. "We do not consider race when we draw up the districts, so we have no need for such figures. But I think if you went

into any school in Columbia you would find Negro students. Maybe you wouldn't in some, I don't know. But I think on the whole that's what you'd find."

STEERE SAID he saw no conflict between his roles on the school board and the Human Rights Commission. If the commission were called upon to look into a case involving the schools, Steere said he would help the commission find the facts but would disqualify himself when the commission voted on recommendations to the City Council.

He said he took the non-salaried commission job because "we as administrators want to take an active part in the community. Schools have to serve the community. We're pretty busy here, working evenings and Saturdays, but everybody is busy these days. We all have to take some part in community development."